



The importance of speaking up – the ‘student voice’

The active and authentic involvement of students has been identified as a key factor in creating safe and supportive schools. A significant body of national and international research suggests that student voice:

- should involve young people’s active participation in shared decision-making;
- is one avenue through which students can explore and construct their own learning and develop higher order skills;
- is a key to personalising learning;
- is a perspective of distributed leadership that is often overlooked;
- is not always ‘authentic’ in actual practice; and
- can be tokenistic – where young people appear to have a meaningful voice but in fact don’t.

Ranson (2000) argues for ‘pedagogy of voice’ which enables children and young people to explore self and identity, develop self-understanding and self-respect and improve agency, capability and potential. Studies suggest that when young people are listened to, involved in meaningful decision-making processes and supported in expressing their views, they are more likely to feel confident in speaking up when issues of bullying and harassment occur. They are also more likely to have developed a range of skills, strategies and behaviours that assist them in managing difficult or challenging situations.

Fielding and Ruddock (2004) show that when schools engage student voice they create opportunities to facilitate a stronger sense of:

- membership, so that students feel more positive about school;
- respect and self-worth, so that students feel positive about themselves;
- self as learner, so that students are better able to manage their own process in learning; and
- agency, so that students realise that they can have impact on things that matter to them in school.

Student voice is identified as a key component of personalised learning both in Australia and overseas. The [Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 \(PoLT\)](#) in Victoria include the importance of teachers canvassing student opinions and ensuring that class discussions are not dominated by the teacher’s voice.

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Fielding’s framework for evaluating conditions for student voice (2001) seeks to determine whether student voice is authentic. It identifies a number of questions that can be asked including:

- Who is allowed to speak?
- Who listens?
- What kind of organisational culture needs to be developed to enable student voice to thrive?
- What are some of the key considerations to take into account in helping student voice to be and become a significant part of the process of communal renewal?

Personalised learning includes a safe and secure environment where students learn and have problems dealt with effectively. It also involves students having a real say about what they are learning. David Hargreaves (2004) identifies student voice as ‘the most powerful gateway’ for personalising learning as students are encouraged to provide feedback on their learning and contribute to their curriculum.

In 2008, students from Victorian primary school student councils voted on a range of issues through a formal ‘congress’ or parliamentary-style debate (Holdsworth 2009). The majority of motions put to congress related to bullying in schools. Students’ concerns included the ideas that: ignoring the bullying doesn’t work; if people don’t tell anybody they’re more likely to be bullied; some people might feel uncomfortable talking to adults; some people don’t know what to do – there needs to be more information. Congress also identified the need for students to develop assertiveness skills and to be able to attend anti-bullying programs.

The prominence and persistence of the issue of bullying to students, parents, schools and the community confirms its importance as a fundamental issue affecting personal autonomy and well-being. It resonates with ongoing community issues of violence and social harm. The identification of bullying as a key concern is a strong example of both students’ capacity and need for an effective voice in addressing this issue in their learning environment.

Studies show that schools are a major social learning environment for children and young people. However, school cultures are often tacit, automatically accepted and ‘unconscious’. Major features of everyday functioning, even adverse ones such as bullying, can become normalised and invisible. The challenge for positive change in any culture is to achieve genuine critical self-reflection. To promote a real student voice schools need to consider how:

- current support structures and networks develop and model social and civic trust, inclusion and tolerance of diversity;
- democratic decision-making and empowerment are promoted;
- the management and resolution of conflicts are embedded in school practice;
- staff and other adults are modelling and teaching the behaviours and skills needed to create safe and supportive environments.

Hargreaves (2004) suggests that student voice flourishes in a particular kind of school culture. In turn, it helps to replenish such a culture – one that reflects and sustains the school as a community of learners involving teachers, student and school leaders.

Using the idea of community signals that student voice is fundamentally linked to the concept of civics and citizenship. Currently, researchers are considering how young people make sense of their place in communities, develop a sense of identity and legitimacy, and how their sense of citizenship is shaped. Challenges for education systems means supporting young people to explore these issues, and viewing the development of civic values as a complex, evolving process which extends beyond taught programs of responsibility, conformity and ‘appropriate behaviour’.

Haynes (2009) suggests that school communities should model what their civics classes teach and thus avoid prohibiting students from practising ‘civic habits of the hearts and exercising their freedom of conscience’:

‘We want to inspire students to follow their conscience not in spite of what we teach and do in our schools, but because of what we teach and do.’

Current international research is exploring whether schools need to move away from instrumental programs for creating ‘good’ citizens towards promotion of new concepts that support development of a sense of citizenship. Schools can use the questions in the box to achieve effective self-reflection about their own practices in this area.

Who speaks?

A research report from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria (Manefield et al. 2007) explores student voice from a historical perspective and consider new directions. It reports that:

- Student voice is not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it is about having the power to influence change.
- Some young people are more willing to speak than others, while those who are perhaps least served by schools are less willing to speak.
- Often students are not able to speak to those who have the power to change what happens in schools.
- The subjects that students are encouraged to speak about are often of low level importance, while important matters are not addressed.
- The most disengaged are least likely to raise their voices.

Schools can ask themselves the following questions:

- Are our children and young people being given genuine opportunities to be heard and to participate in collaborative decision-making on issues that are important to them?
- Whose voice, views and opinions are being heard and valued, and whose are being ignored?
- How are students contributing collaboratively and constructively to peers, family, school and the wider community?
- How does our school’s culture help or hinder our students when issues bullying and harassment arise?

The concept of school culture is at the heart of any effective school reflection on student voice. It can be addressed through analytical questions to determine aspects of school culture affecting the empowerment of students, adult modelling and tacit norms about learning, human relationships and behaviour:

- are all students developing skills in assertiveness and conflict resolution?
- do all students feel that their voice is heard and respected by peers and adults?
- are students developing individual goals aimed at improving the social/emotional environment?
- do all students know what to say and do when bullying occurs?
- how are students assisted in establishing and maintaining a range of positive social relationships?
- how are students taught to manage interpersonal difficulties and refrain from hurting others?

A measure of the effect of responding to these questions could be asking this additional question: Is the student voice and socially responsible actions thriving where it matters most – wherever and whenever adults are not present?

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